Was Never Approached, He Says

N.Y. Lawyer Named as Man FBI Picked to Replace King

By Anthony Marro
New York Times News Service

A prominent Manhattan lawyer, Samuel R. Pierce Jr., has been identified as the man whom officials of the Federal Bureau of Investigation once considered trying to groom for a position of leadership in the civil rights movement, apparently without his knowledge or consent.

According to a source familiar with the proposal, Pierce was the person that William C. Sullivan, a senior official in the bureau, suggested might be developed by the bureau to steer blacks "in the proper direction" if the bureau was successful in removing the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as a civil rights leader.

Pierce, in a telephone interview, said that he "didn't know anything about it," had never met Sullivan and had never been approached on the matter by anyone.

The details of the proposal by Sullivan, who is now dead, were disclosed in a Senate Intelligence Committee report two years ago, but the name of the person he suggested might be used was not made public.

PIERCE, HOWEVER, is identified in the forthcoming issue of the magazine The Nation as the person Sullivan had in mind, and a source familiar with the situation confirmed yesterday that he was in fact the person Sullivan had named.

The source said the intelligence committee had never found any evidence that steps had been taken to carry out the plan, although it had apparently been approved by the late FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover.

Pierce, 55, is now a member of the law firm of Battle, Fowler, Jaffin, Pierce & Kheel and recently served as the chief mediator in the contract dispute between the New York City Transit Authority and its workers.

At the time Sullivan made his proposal in a memorandum in January 1964, Pierce, a Republican, had already established a solid reputation as a lawyer, as a criminal court judge in Manhattan and as an official in the Treasury Department. He had also held a number of staff posts on congressional committees, but he was not known as a civil rights activist.

SULLIVAN'S PROPOSAL was made at a time when FBI agents, acting on the orders of Hoover, were engaged in a campaign to discredit the late King and to remove him as a leader of the civil rights movement.

Internal FBI documents made public in recent years show that bureau agents gave derogatory information abouu King to reporters, church leaders and government officials and tried repeatedly to show that he and his organization were under the influence of Communists.

In his memorandum, Sullivan suggested that the bureau not only try to persuade the country that King was, in his words, "a fraud, demagogue and scoundrel," but also try to help develop a leader to "assume the role of the leadership of the Negro people when King has been completely discredited."

Sullivan died last autumn after being shot by another hunter on the opening day of the deer season.

Pierce said he was shown a copy of the memorandum several years ago, by a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, and said at that time that it was the first he had heard of the matter.

"As a matter of fact, Dr. King was a friend of mine; I argued a case for him before the Supreme Court," he said. He added that he would have rejected any such plan if it had been proposed to him. "That's not my route," he said.